Apologetics Is What? April 1, 2002

By Guest Writer by Ronald Nash <http://www.reasons.org/articles/apologetics-is-what>

During my travels, I speak to thousands of laypeople every year who seem uninformed about the subject of apologetics. When I report that one of the topics I teach and write books about is apologetics, some seem to think that I’m in the business of apologizing for the Christian faith. The question for this issue is “Apologetics is what?”

Most dictionaries use the word apologist to mean any person who argues in defense of some position or cause. If we use the word in this broad sense, it is obvious that some people act as apologists for such things as democracy, communism, capitalism, vegetarianism, and aerobics. While almost any position or belief may have its apologists, I use the term to mean the philosophical defense of the Christian faith. Someone engaged in apologetics intends to show that A (some believer) is within his rights in believing the essential tenets of the Christian faith, or that B (some unbeliever) is mistaken in rejecting essential Christian beliefs.

Distinguishing between negative and positive apologetics can be helpful. In **negative apologetics**, the major objective is producing answers to challenges to the Christian faith. The proper task of negative apologetics is removing obstacles to faith. Many people refuse to believe because they think that difficulties like the problem of evil or the alleged impossibility of miracles makes the acceptance of some important Christian beliefs untenable. When enough tenets of the Christian faith become unacceptable (for some, this need involve only one claim, such as the Incarnation or the Resurrection), they find unbelief easier than faith.

In negative apologetics, the apologist is playing defense. In **positive apologetics**, the apologist begins to play offense. It is one thing to show (or attempt to show) that assorted arguments against religious faith are weak or unsound; it is a rather different task to offer people reasons why they should believe. The latter is the task of positive apologetics. The person engaged in doing positive apologetics might attempt to provide proofs or arguments for the existence of God. Or the apologist might direct the attention of the unbeliever to something he already knows and help him see how such a belief supports in some way the existence of God.

For example, when I used to teach philosophy to undergraduate college students, I would sometimes ask them to tell me what the number one is. They would usually reply by writing some of the many symbols we use such as “1” or “I.” I would then explain that such symbols are not really the number we are seeking but are only convenient ways we use to refer to the real number one. No wise person should ever confuse a symbol for something with the thing itself. So what then is the number one?

The first step is to recognize that the number one is a concept. What is a concept? The short answer is that it is an idea. The next step is to ask where the concept of oneness exists. The idea of oneness, like all ideas, exists in minds. The third step is to note that the number one is eternal. If someone has trouble with this claim, ask when the number one began to exist. Not only has the number one always existed, it is impossible for the number one ever to change. If the number one were ever changed, it would cease to be the number one. After all, if the idea of oneness changed, let us say, into the number two, then it would no longer be the number one.

So where are we? I believe we can show many people that the concept of oneness is an eternal and unchanging idea that exists in some mind. And, the only kind of mind in which this kind of eternal and unchanging idea could exist must be an eternal and unchanging mind. When I reach this point in my little example, some student in the back of the classroom usually raises his hand and asks if I am talking about God.

I hope you understand that my little journey into positive apologetics represents just a beginning. A great deal more must be said. The rest of the story requires your own little sojourn in the world of apologetics books. There are lots of good books to begin your study of apologetics, books written by such philosophers as J. P. Moreland, Norman Geisler, and R. C. Sproul. My own apologetics book is titled Faith and Reason. I recommend that every thinking person read at least one apologetics text in his or her life. Who knows but that you’ll like it so much, you’ll want to read more.

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Subjects: General Apologetics Guest Writer